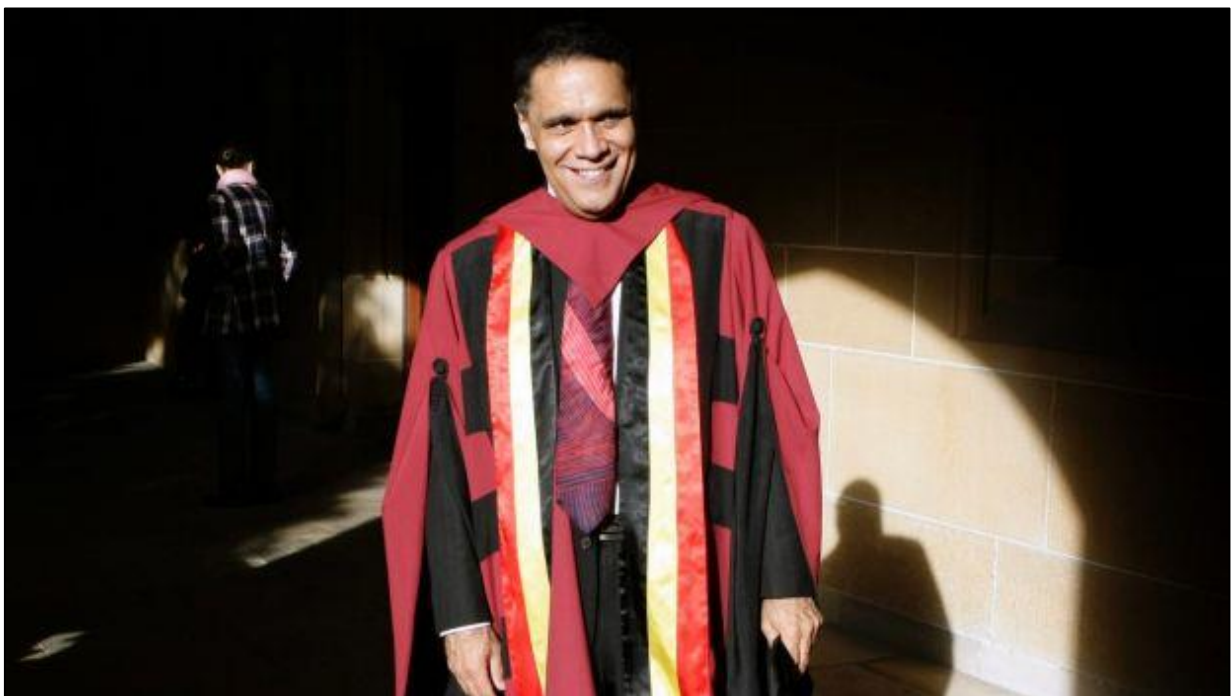


University of Sydney senior executive staff member takes legal action over dismissal

Anna Patty
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The University of Sydney's first deputy vice-chancellor for Aboriginal services, Professor Shane Houston, is taking legal action over his dismissal from the position. Senior academics have told Fairfax Media they were mystified about the reasons behind an email they received in which the university's vice-chancellor Michael Spence announced Professor Houston's sudden departure with "regret and disappointment" on August 24.



Shane Houston was the inaugural deputy vice-chancellor (Indigenous strategy and services) at the University of Sydney. Photo: Tamara Voninski

Fairfax Media has confirmed Professor Houston, who was the the University of Sydney's inaugural deputy vice-chancellor for Indigenous strategy and services, has made a general protections application to the Fair Work Commission in response to the termination of his employment.

A spokeswoman for the University of Sydney said it was aware of the case lodged in the Fair Work Commission "and vigorously denies any wrongdoing".

In his email to staff, Dr Spence praised Professor Houston for his achievements since 2011 in advancing Indigenous participation, engagement, education and research through the Wingara Mura – Bunga Barrabugu Strategy.

Dr Spence said the strategy had seen a 36 per cent increase in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students studying at Sydney, an almost doubling of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff numbers and consistently high success rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

"Through the strategy, the university has also become a more culturally competent institution, and an Indigenous perspective has become more firmly embedded in our day-to-day life," Dr Spence said.

Thanking Professor Houston for his contribution, Dr Spence said he had "brought a vision and determination to ensuring that the University of Sydney is a place where we all have a greater understanding of the history and the distinctive contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to Australian society".

Dr Spence said he looked forward to continuing to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and research "as core to our identity as an Australian institution".

"The university remains committed to ensuring the continuing success of the Wingara Mura – Bunga Barrabugu Strategy, and we will take this opportunity to refresh and strengthen our approach so we can continue to be relevant and responsive to the needs of our Indigenous communities."

Former Northern Territory Labor minister Marion Scrymgour told Fairfax Media she had arranged to meet with Dr Spence on September 26 to discuss her concerns that the program which Professor Houston and his colleague Shane Perdue had established on the Tiwi Islands was in danger of being "watered down". The program, which is now on hold, gives University of Sydney students the opportunity for a cultural exchange in remote Aboriginal communities.

Ms Scrymgour, who is chief executive officer of the Tiwi Islands Regional Council, said she has considered "walking away" from the program if it did not continue as originally agreed.

"All the commitments the university gave as an exchange for us to open up our organisation is now turning into a one-way street. We are not happy," Ms Scrymgour said.

"We were concerned that Shane was stood down with no discussion or communication. I know it has caused a lot of concern.

"We've worked together quite extensively over many years and I know the quality of Shane and the work that he has done."

Ms Scrymgour said the Service Learning in Indigenous Communities program had given University of Sydney students a deeper insight and experience of Aboriginal community life.

"Shane Houston and Shane Perdue were the drivers of that [program]," Ms Scrymgour said.

Mr Perdue is of native American descent from the Cherokee people.

Fairfax Media understands Professor Houston's appointment of Shane Perdue as director strategic management, Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Indigenous Strategy and Services, was an issue with university management.

The university spokeswoman said Professor Houston's departure "was related to a number of issues; best summarised as a developing management style that was both deeply inappropriate and incompatible with a publicly funded institution".

The university spokeswoman said it has "recently become aware of issues with the Service Learning in Indigenous Communities program, including safety and compliance concerns, which has resulted in some aspects of the program being put on hold while they are resolved".

"The university remains committed to the program and is seeking to resolve these issues as quickly as possible."

Fairfax Media has sought comment from Professor Houston, but has not received a response.

Mr Perdue declined to comment, saying he was on extended sick leave.

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